

# Counting the cost of missing persons

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By Carol Kiernan, Manager, National Missing Persons Unit

**On 1 July 2003 the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) became a functional unit within the AFP. The NMPU coordinates and promotes a national integrated approach to reducing the number of those going missing and their impact on the community. Working with jurisdictional Police Missing Persons Units and non-government tracing organisations, the NMPU has been shaking up the approach to missing persons nationally through innovative research, community engagement and international cooperation.**

Since its establishment in 1996 the NMPU was based in the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence (ABCI). In January 2003 when the ABCI merged with two other crime agencies to form the Australian Crime Commission (ACC) the Police Commissioners decided that the role and functions of the NMPU did not fit within the ACC's mandate of targeting serious and organised crime. The AFP was considered the most appropriate location for the NMPU, able to support the law enforcement, government and community facets of its role.

The NMPU now resides in the International Operations area under the direction of Alan Scott, Director Operations Support. Carol Kiernan, the Manager of the NMPU, has moved with the unit into the AFP.



## NMPU role

The NMPU provides:

- *National coordination* through its two committees, the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons (PCGMP) and the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons (NACMP). The PCGMP, involving the Officers in Charge of jurisdictional Missing Persons Units, delivers a coordinated national approach to police investigation of missing persons. The NACMP includes representatives of

law enforcement, non-government tracing organisations, community groups and families and friends of missing persons<sup>1</sup>. Through these committees critical issues relating to missing persons are addressed.

- *Heightened public awareness* of missing persons as an issue of importance for Australians. This is achieved through advocacy at all levels of government and the private sector. The NMPU reaches the wider community through its public campaigns such as National Missing Persons Week.



- *National investigative support.* The NMPU resolves issues relating to national and international coordination, seeking agreement to national policies and procedures to ensure no duplication or gaps in service across policing and the non government organisations (NGO's) working in the field of missing persons.

### Missing persons in Australia: addressing the need

Every 18 minutes someone is reported missing to police in Australia; 30,000 are reported missing every year. A landmark NMPU research study, *Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community*<sup>2</sup>, provided the national context for missing persons in Australia. It analysed police and other agency statistics and case reports, consulted with a wide range of organisations directly and indirectly involved in missing person issues and interviewed approximately 300 families and friends of persons reported missing to police.

The research study widened the focus of the NMPU from its prior emphasis on long-term and suspicious cases as it showed that only a small proportion of those reported missing to police fitted the 'traditional' view that missing persons are people who have been abducted or become victims of violence. The study showed that safety concerns, such as that the person had been abducted, suicided or suffered an accident, were given in one in five cases as the reason for reporting the person missing. However, these safety concerns were confirmed relevant in only a very small percentage of cases (1.5%). Almost all cases reported to police (99.5% over a three-year period) were located, many within hours. However more often cases were closed because the missing person returned or made contact or because families and friends had found the missing person, rather than police locating the individual. The research indicated a high recidivist element – one-third goes missing again and under similar circumstances.

The research received international recognition and provided some key directions to the national policy response to missing persons. It demonstrated the clear need for:

- prevention as part of any policy solution;
- coordinated location efforts, both across agencies and in collaboration with the missing person's families, friends and the community;
- raising awareness among relevant agencies, government decision-makers, the wider community, and missing persons themselves about the impacts of going missing and the sorts of action that each can take to mitigate those social and economic impacts; and
- support for those affected, acknowledging the extensive and pervasive impacts on families and friends.

However it was clear to the NMPU and its partners that there was a scarcity of resources in the missing person arena in Australia. It was also seen as unlikely that sufficient missing person-specific resources would be made available to match the need. It was also recognised that the NMPU, jurisdictional Police Missing Person Units and non-government tracing organisations could not directly deliver the level of support required by missing people and their families even if their limited budgets were increased substantially.

The research showed that people go missing for a myriad of reasons and as a result have a broad range of needs. It was clearly necessary to develop a framework that could engage existing social welfare agencies such as those supporting the mentally ill; others counselling alcohol, drug, gambling addiction; those working with homeless youth and so on as many were not aware that some of their clients were missing persons.

Families could also benefit from support agencies gaining an appreciation of the missing person dimension and responding with appropriate strategies. The NMPU research illustrated the negative impacts on families when well-intentioned agencies failed to understand the particular needs of missing person families.

For example, in the NMPU research there were cases where families were encouraged by counsellors to hold memorial services so that they could 'move on' with their own lives while the families were instead seeking practical solutions to help them cope while waiting to learn what had happened.

#### Promoting a holistic approach: the PLEaS Framework

The PLEaS framework was developed in consultation with the NMPU's two national committees and families with missing persons. It

provides a common goal for all those affected by missing persons in a holistic, coordinated way across agencies and in partnership with the community.

This collaboration involves:

- **P**revention – finding ways to prevent people going missing and options for people in crisis;
- **L**ocation - cooperation between police and tracing organisations, supported by government agencies with information that may assist in finding missing people;
- **E**ducation - empowering families and friends to be involved in the search, as well as encouraging missing people themselves to make contact so that they are no longer considered missing; and
- **S**upport - addressing the impacts on families and friends so that those affected have access to appropriate support to alleviate the distress and other consequences experienced.



The PLEaS framework provides opportunities for agencies to connect and respond to missing person needs. The NMPU promoted this framework recently during National Missing Persons Week 2003 and continues to provide information on how agencies can engage with missing person issues through the NMPU websites [www.missingpersons.info.au](http://www.missingpersons.info.au) (NMPU general website) and [au.missingkids.com](http://au.missingkids.com) (NMPU site hosted by the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children and focussed primarily on children abducted by non-custodial parents).

#### International developments

In July 2003 the NMPU was invited to share its experience and knowledge, including the PLEaS framework, at a major international conference on missing persons held in Windsor Great Park, England. Missing and at Risk: Progress through Partnership was jointly organised by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the National Missing Persons Helpline and supported by the Home Office. The NMPU was the only agency invited from the southern hemisphere.

There were 50 delegates from all counties in the United Kingdom and other international representatives from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, Hungary, Ireland. Many were senior police officers but there were also high-ranking representatives from non government organisations such as the National Missing Persons Helpline, Barnardos, The Smile of a Child, Greece, Red Cross, Netherlands, Telefono Azzurro, Italy and Parents and Abducted Children Together (PACT).

The government departments that were represented included the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department of Education and Skills.

The conference aimed to progress the establishment of an international base for information sharing, cooperation and working in partnership across government, police and NGOs.

The keynote address was presented by Professor John Grieve who had a distinguished 38-year career in the Metropolitan Police Service before moving into academia. His address *So long at the fair... Missing person, Critical Incident, Risk, Police and Policing in the 21st century* began with the premise that the measure of a civilised society was how well it treated its most vulnerable, the missing person. He argued that prolonged disappearance should be investigated effectively, not to do so was a contravention of a variety of rights held by the missing person. This challenges a commonly held view of certain government agencies that to access information to locate a missing person infringes the missing person's privacy.

Professor Grieve viewed as positive the current blurring of the edges across the roles of police, NGOs and volunteers. He encouraged the adoption of a more community-centric policing model which derives intelligence from its communities and empowers those communities to participate in the development of appropriate responses. Missing persons was seen as an excellent vehicle for this intelligence approach.

The conference was chaired by Assistant Commissioner David Veness, QPM CBE, currently in charge of the Specialist Operations Department of



the Metropolitan Police Service, encompassing anti-terrorism throughout the British Isles. He spoke of the mission in missing persons being to 'reduce the risk of harm to missing persons' but amended this at the end of the conference, after digesting the Australian PLEaS framework, to include prevention.

He described 'rings of action', the inner ring being police and NGO tracing organisations, the next ring embracing the support agencies such as social services, educational institutions and the third ring being the international dimension. He felt that the London conference provided an opportunity to document the roles, responsibilities and inter-relationships within and across the rings of action.

There were many innovative strategies in missing persons presented and discussed. The National Missing Persons Helpline described the results of Missing from Care, a three-year project funded by the Department of Health and piloted in East Sussex, Nottingham City, Leeds, Gloucestershire, Newham and Lewisham.

This pilot showed the importance of reporting and mapping those missing from institutions as the results highlighted institutions where children were at risk. There was also the need for them to be interviewed when they were located as many issues of concern could then be addressed. In Australia where one-third of our missing people go missing again and a high proportion is missing from institutions, there is much for us to learn from the pilot.

#### Leveraging NGO and Police cooperation for better results

The need for police to work more closely with NGO's has been recognised in the United Kingdom as it has been in Australia. The Home Office Compass Report 2000 determined that an agreement should be developed between United Kingdom Police and the National Missing Persons Helpline to exchange, handle and respond to issues surrounding missing persons.

The Helpline has 53 liaison officers working within the UK Police Services and is now ready to sign a protocol for the exchange of information and missing person cases to assist in their early resolution. A four-stage implementation plan has been developed which will allow for an incremental exchange of information and lead to an electronic connection. Standardisation of procedures and a commonality in risk understanding and management is also being developed.

The need for police to cooperate within and across jurisdictions was noted, particularly in relation to unidentified bodies. It was argued that all unidentified bodies are missing persons and that most will be found recorded as such somewhere in the world. This

reiterated the importance of international cooperation and information sharing.

#### Recognition and response to risk in missing persons

Vulnerability and risk were frequent issues. It was agreed that more research is required before any confidence can be applied to risk management in missing persons. It was also noted that there was revisionist thinking in the categorisation of 'low' and 'high risk' groups.

For example, 'street-wise' youth were previously seen as 'low risk' missing persons. However recent cases had challenged that orthodoxy and 'street-wise' young people are now viewed as 'high risk' and vulnerable missing persons as they are more likely to be prey to offenders because of their 'street' accessibility.

Case studies presented at the conference illustrated the importance of establishing and following standard operating procedures and regularly reviewing outstanding cases. The confidence of the whole community in its police service can be shattered by one missing person case particularly that of a child, if it is perceived that it has been handled poorly.

#### AFP's national and international dimension: making a difference

There are many challenges ahead for the NMPU. However PLEaS provides a robust framework to engage agencies, professionals and individuals in missing persons which is an issue for all Australians. The NMPU's new home in the AFP provides wider opportunity to contribute to ongoing discussion and development both in Australia and within the international community.

<sup>1</sup> The NACMP currently includes representatives from the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service; Australian Red Cross Tracing and Refugee Service; International Social Service, Australia; Link Up Aboriginal Corporation; Missing Persons Committee NSW Inc; Victorian Missing Persons Committee and Kids Help Line.

<sup>2</sup> NMPU-commissioned research undertaken by Dr Monika and Mr Peter Henderson, *Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1998. This study is available on the NMPU's website ([www.missingpersons.info.au](http://www.missingpersons.info.au)) together with other research papers.